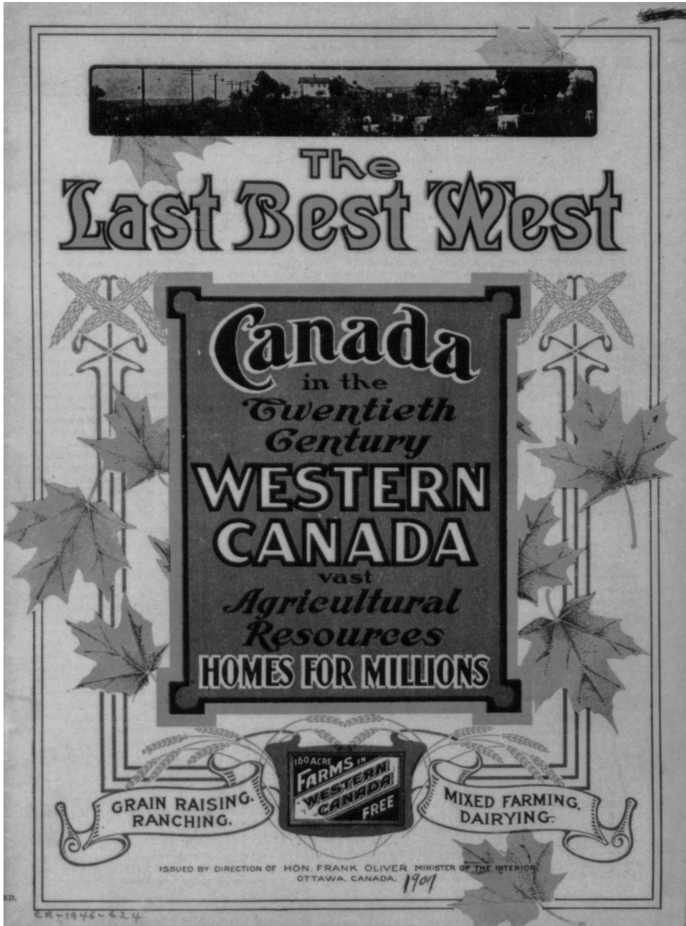
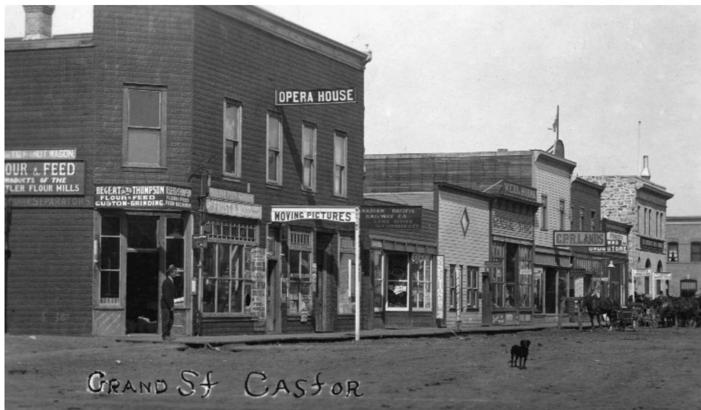
Chapter 8
"There is not a stump on this land, or stones to break"



"The Last Best West"—
Canadian Government advertising poster

IN THE SUMMER OF 1911, Gustav and Anna stepped off the train with their three little girls, Magnhild, Gudrun and Faye, at Castor, Alberta, about 100 miles northeast of Calgary. The new Canadian Pacific Railway extension from Lacombe, east to Castor, went no further. From the train station they saw before them a brand-new modern main street. The town had risen swiftly since its birth two years previously, as business in Castor had been brisk.

Gustav and Anna's friends from Stearns, the Tibbetts and Johnson families, had taken land southeast of Castor in 1910. Other friends from the United States acquired land in that same area. These friends had given Gustav and Anna information about the opportunities here, and encouraged them to come to the western prairies in 1911. Free land had run out in the United States and the economy of Canada was booming. Immigrants were coming into the country in record numbers.



Castor, Alberta, 1911

Canada's economy had been on the upswing since 1900. The federal Liberal government had attracted investors' money by guaranteeing their investments for railroad construction. This brought money from foreign investors into the country at low interest rates. Railroads were under construction across the country, and cities and towns grew all along the rail lines. In the west, these settlements were the centres of business for homesteaders putting down roots in the area. In 1909, the government for the new province of Alberta was up for re-election. They recognized the success of the federal government and offered the same security of investors' money for railroad construction. This brought in workers and contributed to the growth of cities and towns. As an added bonus for the economy, the western provinces had been blessed with adequate rainfall since 1900 and world wheat prices were rising. The thriving economy attracted large numbers of homesteaders and day workers to the area.

The region east of Calgary to the Saskatchewan border, and as far north as Castor down to the Red Deer River, was opening up for homesteading. In 1909, Castor was established, followed by Youngstown three years later. During those years, settlers came north from the CPR mainline south of the Red Deer River, fording the river with their horses and wagons at Steveville. From there they travelled north to Youngstown.

The town of Castor originated when investors planned an extension of a rail line east from Lacombe and Stettler, which connected with

the north-south Calgary-Edmonton line. In July 1909, a land auction was held, at which time a piece of bald prairie was sold off in city lots. This piece of previously unoccupied land became the townsite for the new town of Castor. Immediately after, a great rush of developers beat a path over the open prairie with their horses and wagons, bringing loads of building materials. Construction began that summer. By December, Castor was up and running, with a wide range of business services. Citizens were out to welcome the first train as it chugged into Castor on December 17, 1909. Just seven months after the land auction, *Castor Illustrated Annual* noted. " . . . Our popular hotel proprietor has left nothing undone for the comfort of his guests. His hotel is among the finest in Alberta, being a three-storey building equipped with all modern conveniences and furnished in first-class style. It is hard to realize that such accommodation can be had in a town which seven months ago was open prairie."

Castor grew rapidly as a business centre, as it served that whole region east to the Saskatchewan border and down to the Red Deer River. As settlers laboured to create their homesteads, many purchased their building and other supplies there, and these materials were taken out of town almost as fast as they came in. Castor also sat on the edge of a large coal basin and sandstone quarry, and it was bricks made from sandstone in this quarry that contributed to the construction of many buildings in the new town. By 1911, Castor boasted a public school with five teachers, five lumber supply busi-

nesses, three hotels, ministers for five different churches, nine livery barns, a weekly newspaper, an electric light plant and a grain elevator, as well as other business and professional services, and an opera house. The Sisters of the Holy Rosary constructed a modern new hospital that opened at Castor in 1911, further contributing to the importance of the town. Two years after construction commenced, Castor had an official population of 1,400, and the population of the larger area it served had grown considerably.

Gustav and Anna met Olav and Albert at the train station at Castor in February 1912. They hadn't seen each other for two and a half years. "*When we arrived at the station in Castor, I saw Gustav on the outside. I went out to say hello to him, but he didn't recognize me.*" Eilert now weighed 190 pounds. He wrote that Gustav just stood there and laughed at him.

The three brothers each filed an application for land under the Homestead Act, which offered 160 acres to settlers for a $10 fee, with the land being transferred to the homesteader after he had filled the requirements of the act. The real estate market was active at that time, and prices were high. The brothers had great optimism that they would become landowners, and that the land value would increase. Albert expected that the value might increase by $1,000 per year, and thought that they should stay on the land for a few years before selling. "*People who came here two years ago own from $4,000 to $8,000. I believe we could do half of that.*

"This piece of land is totally flat, not a stump on it, or stones to break. All one has to do is to use the plough and then throw in a potato, or a handful of oats, or wheat in the furrow, plus some fertilizer like we used to do in the old country." Olav and Albert had chosen land located near the very shallow Antelope Lake, attracted by the promise of moisture. The land was stark with no shade, as only willows grew in the area of the near-dry lake. Other than the willows, the growth on the land was stubby, dry grass and that hated weed, the Russian thistle. Gustav had located two miles south, near Sounding Creek. A railroad was to be built next to their land, and that would make it more attractive for resale. The new town of Youngstown was only five or six miles away, so they wouldn't have to go too far to sell their products and to shop.

A Norwegian friend had returned to Norway, and Albert heard that he had lots of money. *"Well, back home they say that a man has lots of money if he has more than, say, 1,000 kroner. Americans are always thought to have lots of money, even when they do not have a dollar to their name."* Albert didn't intend to go back with such a small stake.

They had heard that their cousin Anders had taken land in Canada, but they hadn't heard from him. Gunhilde, another cousin, was contemplating coming to America, but Albert advised that the pay for women was even worse than the pay for men. *"In places like Minnesota, Wisconsin, North Dakota or the southern states, the women only get $2 to $3 per week for their work."*

Albert told a little story about an incident that occurred when they went hunting.

The brothers had headed out near Castor the day before, and shot a wolf. Gustav carried it home and placed it at the front door where they lived. After he put it down, the wolf got up and walked away, back to the woods. Anna stood there and laughed. "*It was alive on the way home and all the time it played like it was dead!*'"

He concluded his letter. "*Say hello to everyone at Rosseland and don't forget all the nice and pretty girls at home . . . .*"

While still living in Castor, in April 1912, Gustav and Anna celebrated the arrival of their fourth daughter, Agnes. Magnhild was now six years old and had started school in Castor, Gudrun was three and Faye was almost two. They would have a full house when they moved to their new homestead that summer.

Olav, Albert and Juergen had been working in Edmonton since the middle of June. "*This city is a nice place. 25,000 is the population. There is a lot of building going on and people say that it will be the largest city in the west in a few years. There are a lot of green trees, and a big river runs right through the city, which makes it beautiful.*" Like the rest of Alberta, Edmonton was experiencing a real estate boom. The city covered twenty-five square miles, and the population was growing by the day. New subdivisions were being planned and were burgeoning

throughout the city, a land speculator's dream. The noise and activity of construction was everywhere, with so many workers and new-comers in the city, that the city council threw open schools as sleeping quarters. Over 2,000 people camped in tents along the river, and scattered elsewhere throughout the city. The weather had been good up to July, in 1912, and was a cause for optimism. It had rained every three or four days followed by sunshine and warm weather. Everything in the fields was lovely and green.

The brothers were moving to their land in August and were required to live on their land for six months of the year. But to start out, they all intended to live on Gustav's property, which was two and a half miles south of Olav and Albert's properties. Juergen had still not decided what to do, as he hadn't been able to make enough money to meet expenses. He was thinking of going back to North Dakota.

They had heard from their cousin Anders, who was living on his homestead. Olav added that it was a tragedy to hear that the *Titanic* had sunk. He hoped that Gunhilde was not on that ship. Gunhilde never did come to America, perhaps discouraged by the news of low wages for women.

"We are no longer living in Castor," Olav wrote from Youngstown in October 1912. *"We are now living in Gustav's homestead. We have been here for two months."*

The brothers had chosen land north of the new CNR line to Youngstown. James Young had

Gudrun, Faye and Magnhild, 1912

come over from the Lacombe area in 1909, with a team of horses and all his building and household supplies on wagons. He set up a homestead and a store, and early in 1912, he sold his property to developers, who subdivided the land and sold lots to create Youngstown, named after him. By the summer of 1912, several businesses were already established, including a bank and hardware store, which operated from a tent on the main street until their building was completed later in the fall.

The already experienced Tibbetts and Johnson families assisted Gustav in building his first sod house in August 1912. The Roselands camped with their friends on the adjoining property, while the sod house was under construction. *"There are very few Scandinavians around here. All our neighbours are Americans. But many of them we knew before."*

Many homesteaders built their first home from sod. Late summer and fall was the time to build a sod house, when the roots of the sod were tough and dry. The sod was free, and the houses were cool in summer and warm in winter. The homesteaders would first place four pegs in the ground to determine the size and parameters of the structure, and then dig into the floor area until hitting hardpan, or solid dirt, several inches or a foot deep. With a plough or sharp cutting tool, they cut several inches into the dry, grassy turf, creating building bricks about three feet long and a foot wide. So as not to weaken or damage the tough root system, they carefully carried the "Alberta brick" on a board to the construction site. They laid it root-side-up in a careful pattern to construct the walls, leaving a space for the door and windows. The roof was the most difficult part of the structure to build. They used different construction methods on the roof, depending on what was available and practical at the time. The two greatest problems with sod houses were their tendency to leak in heavy rains, and the little creatures that might appear out of the walls. However, if the turf was cut cleanly, the inside walls could be plastered. Faye remembered well the plastered inside walls of their sod house, and family photos show a nicely finished interior of the Roseland sod home.

Olav continued, "*It is our idea to sell the land when the time comes and then move back to Norway.*" To Norwegians born in Norway during the years of the highest birth rate of the 1800s, with scarce agricul-

tural land, the offer of free land by the Canadian government seemed a golden opportunity. Land ownership was a privilege in Norway, an impossible achievement for large portions of the population. The Roselands were determined to become successful farmers, to gain title to their land, and then sell it. They had become land speculators, like many others.

Until 1670, this land had been inhabited chiefly by nomadic tribes and bison. About 15,000 years ago, the most recent Ice Age ended, and the western prairies became a great lake. This eventually drained, leaving a great sandy wasteland carved by coulees, through which the water had flowed away. The rivers and creeks that drain the region today were probably established about 6,000 years ago, when the climate became hot and dry. Vegetation returned to the area; then came the bison and other animals, followed by nomadic peoples. The British government, which had claimed the land earlier, granted a charter for the land to the Hudson's Bay Company in 1670. The company established a fur trading industry west of Ontario and across the prairies.

Great Britain had concerns about the administration of this vast and remote land. In the 1850s, the British government sent John Palliser to survey the land to determine the resources and possible uses for the lands. Palliser determined that the area, which later became southeast Alberta and southwest Saskatchewan, was not suitable for agricultural

use. This region of the western prairies became known as the Palliser Triangle. In order to be relieved of the administration of the land, Great Britain urged the Hudson's Bay Company to sell the western lands to the Canadian government. At that time Canada consisted of only four provinces.

The problem escalated after the American Civil War, when demobilized soldiers headed west and north in search of land, threatening encroachment into Canada. The British feared that the United States had designs on their territories in western Canada. British shipbuilders had built a ship for the Confederates during the Civil War, which did a great deal of damage to Yankee shipping, so the American government demanded that the British grant them the British North America lands as war reparations. Great Britain refused. The Canadian solution to the threatened encroachment was to purchase the western lands from the Hudson's Bay Company and form a new government, in 1867, in the form of a confederation. When British Columbia joined in 1871, Canada was united from the Atlantic to the Pacific.

In January 1870, Prime Minister John A. Macdonald wrote, "*It is quite evident to me that the United States Government are resolved to do all they can, short of war, to get possession of our western territory, and we must take immediate and vigorous steps to counteract them*." Macdonald determined that a transcontinental railway should unite the country, and that the western lands should be settled. He brought in the Dominion Lands Act in 1872 to open up the prairie

west for homesteading, and embarked on an era of railroad building, financial scandals and remarkable accomplishments that ended with the completion of the railroad from coast to coast in 1885.

A new threat to the west emerged in the 1860s and '70s, when American traders ventured north into Canada via the Missouri River and Fort Benton in Montana, to southern Alberta. They offered "hooch," or adulterated whiskey, to the natives, in exchange for buffalo hides. For a number of years there was a well-beaten 210-mile mule-train trail, known as the "Whoop-Up Trail," between Fort Benton and an American trading post near Lethbridge known as Fort Whoop-Up. Considerable lawlessness prevailed, but Macdonald put an end to this by sending a newly formed North-West Mounted Police force to Alberta in 1875. The end of this era also saw sickness, disease and starvation decimating the native tribes, caused partly by the loss of their main food source, the buffalo. In 1878, there were great fires on the prairie grasslands and the declining numbers of buffalo went south for the winter, never to return. A way of life and an abundance of wildlife had been destroyed by the white man within a generation.

In the late 1890s, Prime Minister Wilfrid Laurier appointed Clifford Sifton Minister of the Interior, with the responsibility of establishing settlement in the west. Prior to that time the government had granted grazing leases to ranchers, but settlers had been slow in coming, frightened by reports of drought, early frosts, floods and grass-

hoppers. Sifton embarked on a massive program of publicity and enticements to bring "desirable" settlers to the west. In the first decade of the 1900s, the Canadian government widely distributed an array of posters seeking homesteaders in the United States and Great Britain: "40,000 American Citizens Needed," "The Last Best West, Homes for Millions," and "Canada—The Prize Wheat Belt of the World." Olav had been attracted by the Canadian advertising in Kentucky when he wrote, *"Canada should be perfect for oats and wheat."* In 1905, when homesteaders began migrating to these western lands, the federal government formed the new provinces of Alberta and Saskatchewan, from land previously known as the Northwest Territories.

After 1900, the economy in Alberta began to change. Railroads were under construction. Ranching declined sharply with the severe winter of 1906-07, when large numbers of cattle froze to death. In increasingly large throngs, settlers came in to claim homestead lands, and towns grew quickly along the rail lines to service the settlers. Edmonton, the newly appointed capital of the province, grew quickly, while Calgary commenced an annual stampede and served the business needs of the southern part of the province. With readily available money for investments, the real estate market and the economy of the province soared.

The prairie west was rife with activity and optimism in 1912. The future for the province of Alberta looked bright indeed.